



Mondo - Bangkok: interview with Antonio Cupaiolo, when customer care becomes the main aspect of one's work

Dal nostro corrispondente a Bangkok - 04 ott 2022 (Prima Notizia 24) Antonio Cupaiolo is the main pivot of Ailati Resto, his Italian restaurant featuring an intimate and refined location that overlooks right along a major thoroughfare that runs

through Bangkok's Chinatown.

All around rages traffic dotted with colorful cabs, everywhere the afternoon hubbub of children and teens leaving school to go home, cars, buses, riders who -on their motorcycles- are busy following Google Map route directions and delivering as fast as possible, what is requested via app and cell phone, especially food. During the harshest days of Covid, when the Capital was imposed the most absolute lockdown, riders delivered the essential and necessary food to feed people who could no longer access the street foods vendors under their homes, as well as grocery shopping at the supermarket but also documents, packages, various items and goods also ordered through the appropriate apps. They were an essential element for the very survival of the city and its people. When you open the door of Ailati Resto, an elegant and quaint Italian restaurant that stands near the gateway to Bangkok's Chinatown, which is called Yaowarat by the locals, you enter a quiet and private corner, characterized by sage green, live-carved and exposed wooden beams, and handcrafted ceramics hanging on the walls, of fine workmanship and commensurate with the venue's walls, artfully peeling back and revealing multiple overlapping colors of plaster and rows of red bricks, a room arranged on two levels connected by a spiral staircase also made entirely of rough live-carved wood and supported by sturdy iron rod frames. Some tables are also set up outside the restaurant, near the entrance, and from their position, one can watch the kitchen and catch a glimpse, live, of all the workmanship of the team operating in the kitchen, from Antonio Cupaiolo himself, who takes special care in making the pizzas and some particular courses, to his Thai collaborators but by now, highly specialized in Italian cuisine. Antonio Cupaiolo is the Chef and Pizzaiolo of Ailati Resto, his restaurant that stands out on Charoenkrung Road, just across the street from the Saphan Thaksin stop of the Silom Line, BTS Skytrain, the elevated outdoor light rail that connects various nerve points in the vast Downtown of Bangkok, the megalopolis that plays the role of Thailand's Capital. It is called Ailati because it juts out at an angle over two streets (Ai-lati, Two-Sides, in fact) but also because it is the word "Italia" spelled backwards. Forty-three years old, a native of San Buono, in the Province of Chieti, Antonio Cupaiolo is an Abruzzo born native who "tells" how much the proverbial Abruzzo people' stubbornness has been a useful companion to him during his stay in the land of Thailand. How many years have you been living and working in Thailand and why did you decide to settle specifically in Bangkok? I

have been living and working in Thailand for eight years now, the first six I spent in Pattaya, the last two right here in Bangkok. Eight years passed very quickly, if you look closely. The reason why, after so much travel, I decided to live in Thailand is quickly stated. I have been working since I was a young boy, for seventeen years I worked as an employee -always in the field of Catering and Tourism, in Misano Adriatico, doing so-called "working seasons," that is, winter or summer work cycles, during which I performed the most varied tasks. There is, however, one factor that led me to choose Thailand, that is, on the other side of the globe: danger. In South America I often felt, all around me, the feeling of danger; when you are around, especially if you are a foreigner and not familiar with the unwritten rules of local living, you are always exposed to the risk of running into bad experiences. All this, here in Thailand, I have never felt it. You can walk around, for example, with a lot of banknotes in your pocket but you don't feel that it could happen that someone-with violence-wants to take them away from you or even point a gun at you to steal the money from your pocket. And this, I mean, at all times of the day and night. In the big South American, Brazilian or Mexican metropolises, to give random examples, I don't think you can feel as safe in the middle of the night when you're out and about as when it happens here in Bangkok, maybe because you finished work late or for whatever reason you lingered. You lived and worked in Pattaya and today you are in Bangkok, a large and populous megalopolis while Pattaya is a heavily Tourism-driven city. What have you noticed, in terms of change, during these years of your stay in Thailand? It must first be said that Pattaya and Bangkok are two urban realities with profoundly different souls. Pattaya is seemingly lighter and more frivolous, a seaside place where having fun is the local must. It is also a location where the lack-or less presence-of moral restraints seems to characterize the spirit of the place more. The girls you see in Pattaya who work commodifying themselves in various ways, you immediately sense that they do so to support their families of origin. This involves looking with a different eye at what, in our old world and our usual way of thinking, might be judged by quite different moralistic criteria. To Bangkok brought me precisely my own personal need to change, to turn around the ways of living and working in Pattaya. Bangkok is a container of opportunity but also of discretion and freedom hardly found elsewhere; like all megacities, in a way, a certain quota of anonymity "protects" you. During all your years of working in this industry, have you honed your own philosophy or particular business strategy? I started very early in my work, and in all this time I have gone from being an employee to first becoming a partner and then a manager, as was also the case here in Thailand, in Pattaya and later in Bangkok. In every job I have done, I have always tried to welcome everything with curiosity, with the principle that, everything you learn can be useful to you someday. Rearranging a room, for example, when I did that job, makes you detail-oriented, meticulous, you can't let go of any element, until you comply with the standard procedures typical of that task. Even when it comes to the Kitchen and Pizzeria, I have always looked at the professionals, the colleagues, with great respect and attention. This eagerness to learn, today, I try to pass it on to the staff who work with me, team discipline is important to be well together in harmony and to work well, being in the kitchen requires great gifts of patience, especially if you meet and clash, different professionals with different personal experiences and especially where different cultures cross, an aspect to be taken into particular account, in terms of evaluating

the work of the restaurant industry and if we talk about Italian Cuisine in Thailand. Based on which criteria do you choose the ingredients and how do you present it to your clientele? The vast majority of our products are imported, the preserves, the oils, the wines. As far as flours are concerned, in the case of pizzas I have always chosen the T55 and T65 types to achieve better digestibility, the double 00, is "easier" to process but -from the point of view of digestibility- it is the one that creates the greatest feeling of heaviness and lower digestibility. Otherwise, I follow a -traditional? line of preparation, preferring not to -decline? Italian patties according to the various types of clientele, my -Carbonara? to give a classic example, is canonical, does not include cream, to make my point. The dairy products are made locally but are made from milk, not rennet, and the final flavor is what counts, you can taste the difference right away. And as for the relationship with the customer, not surprisingly, I often come out of the kitchen to entertain with the clientele, I explain the wines, the recommended pairings and why, I also tell the story of some dishes or desserts, I illustrate-for example-the origin and particularity of the cannolo alla siciliana rather than the tiramisù. Italian wines, rosés, whites, bubbles, are also increasingly gaining space among the Thai and international clientele coming here. I have always wanted to have a broad menu and to be able to have a dialogue with the customer, not just to get selfish feedback about my professionalism but to listen carefully to their opinion and point of view. It is very important to me to listen to the customer. Ailati Resto, Italian Restaurant, 1495 Charoen Krung Rd, Khwaeng Silom, Bang Rak, Bangkok 10500

di Francesco Tortora Martedì 04 Ottobre 2022